Take a Large Stockpot

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The contents of my recipe file: cardboard ripped from the back of a Bisquick box; newspaper clippings; cards in my mother's, my grandmother's hands; cards in a hand I no longer remember; recipes made so often I know them by heart; recipes not made in all the time since I jotted them down; recipes that are like outgrown toys, the favorite desserts that now seem too sweet, the pastas I find too bland; other cards worn with handling, thick with fingerprints or a filigree of tomato sauce splatters.

There are the recipes I saw affixed to my mother's refrigerator, typed or handwritten, but always the other, the penciled-in script, furling around the edges: "Do not substitute margarine." "Cook until the color of a brown paper bag." "Donna says a little hot sauce goes a long way!" Recipes peppered with exhortations and confidences and neighborly braggadocio. "Great to come home to on a chilly day!" "My family likes to wash this down with Aunt Lucy's Holiday Hot Cocoa (ask me for the recipe)." "A scoop of ice cream, a dash of chocolate sprinkles—then put your feet up and enjoy." Annotations, marginalia, glosses, commentary. The whispered undercurrent of recipes talking among themselves.

I myself am an intermittent and unfocused cook, lacking the patience to coax a delicate dish along, stranger to the skill that can juggle a multi-course meal. I bake sugar cookies at Christmas, mix a salad for a potluck. Otherwise enough bottled spaghetti sauce and TV dinners to get by. But what I do love are soups. Soup recipes I collect like boys do baseball cards, reading glossy coffee table cookbooks, peering at newsletters on co-op bulletin boards. Soups are my one occasion for immersion in the sizzle and steam of kitchens. Just give me one—or else a dozen—to cook and then to eat and I will ask no more.

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Tired and feverish, the two of us slept the morning away. And in the cold afternoon, finally it was I who braved the light, who gathered the little pearls of onions, the stolid potatoes, and the bright-orbed peas and set them to simmering in soft and milky white. The one time when blandness is all that is asked of a soup. There when the body is restless and aching. When we curl under a blanket or perhaps in front of the fireplace's gas flame and move spoon to lips until the bowl is dry. When all we want is soft and unsurprising warmth and the endless reassurance of what is everlastingly the same.

Soup is the primal, the original recipe. The blending back to the originally the same. Soups are all we know of amniotic bliss.

The long diaphanous noodles coiled like dreamy, translucent eels. Clearer than the pale broth itself, clear as lily roots, as clouds. Crisp green peapods, leafy puffs of cilantro. And the hard

peanuts, buried deep, smooth and impenetrable, like all earthy, hidden things. We eat it in spring, when the sun lays stripes across the kitchen table. When bird songs waft back and forth across the hedge and the curtains billow with random warming winds.

The lure of soups is the lure of difference linked. Like those childhood books that sketch vast coherent landscapes out of objects beginning with the letter K. Like ships and shoes and sealing wax—an improbable communion among all the world's disparate things.

Though for years I thought soup was that pallid thing my mother poured from cans. Thought that "vegetable soup" was simply a nonsense word, like the meatless mincemeat pie. Never connecting those lifeless squares of orange and white with actual crispy carrot, literal fluffy, buttery potato.

No blandly viscous, no all-neutralizing gel. Tomato soup: sharp and sweet. Chunks of tomato; the broth cloudy with olive oil and garlic and pepper and dill; the cool, tart dollop of yogurt there on top. One of the pleasures of a real soup: the alternation of textures and flavors, the possibility of creamy, chunky, pungent, sweet, acerbic, juicy, all in one full bite.

On the other hand, I can also fall for soups that are a bit of a cheat, sly soups, cut-corner soups, those soups that avoid paying their dues in time and effort and slide me back to the pleasures of my canned-soup-casserole childhood. From a friend who grew up in Mexico, I have the shyster version of tortilla soup:

Heat water and tomato sauce with a pinch of packaged chili seasoning (stacked among the sloppy joe and tuna casserole mixes in its flourescent bright envelope on the supermarket shelf). Fill your bowl full of edibles: a layer of crumbled Doritos, then chunks of olive, avocado, and cheese. Pour the sauce over the other ingredients, and there it is—from the pre-packaged, the junk food, this thing you are bold enough to call a soup. As absurd as cartoon food, as ridiculous as childhood's carefully baked mud pies. And warm and crackly with Dorito, gooey with avocado and olive, the soft cheese melting, chewy, mellifluous on the tongue.

So then all the world is just soup waiting to be made. Think back to when you dipped your first graham cracker, the sensation of its stale sweetness yielding to the smooth, persuasive milk.

I am a lover of soups because they mingle everything.
I am a lover of soups because you do not have to choose.
I am a lover of soups because they go which way they will. Because their beginnings are known and their endings always a surprise.

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The enticements of a soup are various. To begin with, the feathery brown skin, flesh white as an apple's. You raise the bright blade and the hemispheres cleave apart. All beginnings have their pleasures, but few as forthright as this: this pungency; this crispness; these clean, concentric whorls.

What follows is the teary miasma and the stinging slivers beneath your nails. Sometimes you stop and turn your head aside to catch the fresh and unteared air. Sometimes you pace another room until the thickness of eyes and throat subsides. Breath through your mouth. Chop under running water. Light a candle. Or maybe avoid nicking the bulbous, hairy top, the source, they say, of all these tears.

And then finally the saute (oh, word redolent of butter, of sizzle, of slow, sultry odors winding through the air). The translucent flesh splutters from white to golden brown. The buttery broth thickens, soft and rich as cream. The first of the passages from ingredients to soup.

Or otherwise put: Chop one medium onion. Saute in butter until soft. Transfer the sauteed onion to a medium-sized pot.

Add two cups water, one half teaspoon salt. Ingredients so simple they might appear on some fairytale widow's shelf: the last scrapings of the larder and then, barring some magic, there will be nothing more. Bare water. Acerbic onion. The sharp and parching salt.

And turmeric, drab as earth and light as dust, in appearance as unprepossessing as all the rest. But leave it out and nothing, nothing will come aright. It is the old cane revealed to be the magician's wand, the elixir that allows each taste to come into its own. Eye of newt and toe of frog and one half teaspoon turmeric, two tablespoons sugar, raise to a boil to make the brew complete.

While in a separate bowl, mix half a cup of warm water, two tablespoons flour. Blend to a smooth paste and stir into the heated mix.

(Or that other tale of magic: three hungry soldiers against whom the village bars its doors. They stoke the fire, set the pot to boil, clank in the weight of their solid, earth-covered stones. And slowly, as townsfolk gather around, all the rest materializes as well. Little discs of carrots and onions, crumbly chunks of potato, tight curled dumplings, sprigs of herbs, rich, salty beans, and thickening rice. Something comes from nothing. Stone soup's—and every soup's—surprise.)

So take care that the water is indeed warm. Be careful to sprinkle and stir the flour bit by bit. One of the few moments this recipe can go awry, coagulating in sodden gray lumps instead of broth.

After the measured knife strokes, the ingredients added one by one, now of a sudden this final flurry. The flour to be dissolved, the three eggs beaten in a separate bowl. All of it gathering now like bubbles toward the boil.

And boil now it must; if not, your labor here is wasted. The long yellow rivulet of egg cooks as it hits the scalding hot. You stir and pour, stir and pour, feathering the broth with chewy wisps, dissipating what else would be one leaden mass. (I write my recipes for people like myself. Those of us maladroit among the kitchen's blades and burners, who come to this thing a recipe as to a foreign tongue. For those resistant to command—"Why 'smooth'?" "Why 'boiling'?"—we who must know the hows and whys, the costs of deviation.)

It is a recipe that, like any other, comes to me at the tag end of a history. A friend whose Iranian father, in his Southern California exile, passed on to her this guarantee and taste of home. Of the meal she cooked for us I remember every dish. Rice drenched in the sweet burn of cinnamon and steamy saffron. An eggy fluffiness, meltingly light and sharp with fennel. I remember the wine and the silver dishes of almonds, pistachios, candied fruits. The invitation to nibble from one dish, cleanse your palate, nibble from another, then cleanse again. And I remember, of course, the soup, the pomegranate soup. Fruity. Full. Deep and nourishing.

When first you make it, you think something must be wrong. You imagine it sweet and red, chilled, laced with a dash of mint or dollop of cream. Not this nondescript gruel—strange, paradoxical soup—not all summer's red swallowed up in brown.

Though in fact Hades' long winter has turned at last. The magic beans have sprouted, the water turned to wine. There it sits, fragrant, soul nourishing, simmering on the stove.

Add one and a half cups bottled pomegranate juice, simmer five minutes. Flavor will improve if allowed to cool slightly.